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AUTHOR	Bellott, Fred K.
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ABSTRACT

Stress affects everyone in his/her work and everyday life. Some persons are more effective when they are under a certain level of stress, but there are limits to the amount of stress under which one can perform effectively. Competition within complex organizations today is a risk factor not often recognized by the organizations. All organizations are vulnerable to stress, not only at the executive level but, especially, at the middle-management level. Many organizations have undertaken stress management programs, involving such techniques as physical exercise, recreation, and compulsory vacations. Stress can arise from happy occasions as well as negative ones. Because one cannot avoid stress, administrators should try to manage the stressors that occur and minimize their negative effect. When one is under pressure, minor hassles--such as a family member's health, home maintenance work, or misplacing things--can become major problems. One form of stress is burnout, which happens when aspirations and expectations are thwarted and one becomes depressed and used up. Burnout can be combated by acknowledging and accepting the way the world is. Self-awareness and monitoring of oneself are also necessary to avoid burnout. Three stress checklists are attached as self-assessment instruments. (Author/RW)

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UNDERSTANDING STRESS

Fred K. Bellott
Memphis State University

a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of
The National Association of Elementary School Principals
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The problem of stress is one that is affecting people in all walks of life. Everyone today is subject to various stresses in his or her everyday life, as well as in the world of work. All of us are regularly met with both work related stressors and those that are not work related. There are potential stressors in all human activities and in the environments in which we carry out those activities. A certain level of stress may be appropriate, even necessary, for peak effectiveness in one's work or play (1, p.1). However, too often the level of stress goes far beyond the optimum and becomes harmful, even dangerous to one's wellbeing and to his or her job performance.

Increasingly, people are taking on larger and more complex tasks that have less clearly defined roles and standards for performance. The competitive, achievement-oriented behavior fostered by many organizations has been found to be a major risk factor in coronary heart disease. As organizations struggle to survive and grow in a turbulent environment, they must change their structure, policies, procedures - literally, their way of doing things and the people who do them (1, p.2). Unfortunately, organizations do not readily recognize the stresses that result from these kinds of changes.

> The prevailing focus of organizational members is too narrow to see that the emphasis on short-run productivity is, in the long run, consuming the organization's human resources. Since single, isolated events or conditions seldom cause specific, stress-related dysfunctions, their cumulative effect is easily overlooked. It is doubtful that many companies have been held responsible for on-the-job heart attacks because there is no single, identifiable

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cause for them; yet, they are clearly stress related in a large proportion of cases (1, p.2).

Stressors, according to Adams, usually are external pressures or disruptions that cause non-specific chain reactions inside us. The response is usually the same regardless of the source or cause of the stressor. Adams describes "Episodic" work-related as contrasted to "chronic" work-related stress. The first includes those stressors that happen to one on the job, over which one does not have control, that are organizational events. The second are ill-defined, subjective, attitudinal, situational, day-to-day conditions that surround one in his/her working environment (1, p.).

Episodic stress triggers reactions in chain-like fashion and requires some personal adjustment. It is precipitated by a change, and the more frequently it occurs the greater the stress that results.

Chronic stress brings about more of the gradual, depressive pressure to which we have come to apply the term, "burn out".

When many episodes involving work-related change occur on the job in an organization where people are already working in chronic, highly stressful conditions, it will often be reflected in increased incidence of sick leave, errors in work, and general inattention to detail (1, p. 22).

A recent Newsweek article described the circumstances surrounding the suicide of Alvin Feldman, former president of Continental Airlines (2). The company had just gone through a long, hard strike by flight attendants. They had just experienced a traumatic hijack attempt. And, most recently, Texas International Airlines had mounted an aggressive take-over campaign. The week previous, Feldman had informed his managers that a plan to sell the company to the employees had just fallen through. In a last letter to his children he wrote about his sorrow of losing his wife to cancer the previous year. A closeassociate said, "The constant fighting was wearing us all down, but it was worse

for him. In the last month he had become extremely tired. He was alone with the responsibility and he took it too far" (2).

The Feldman case is a casebook example of "executive stress." Some administrators work and thrive on tension and stress. But it has been found through research that everyone has a breaking point or point of "diminishing return" when further pressure produces less performance. As psychologist Milton Holman put it, "The twelve-hour days don't necessarily wear down an executive's personality. It's the specter of the twelve-hour days tomorrow, next week, and next year that makes them stressed."

However, it is not the top executive who most often is the greatest victim of stress and most likely to succumb to pressure. It is the middle manager who had the biggest problem. People in the middle positions are more frequently caught in stressful circumstances where they are responsible for outcomes yet do not control actions that affect the outcomes and are not responsible for them. They are compelled to function with regard to criteria they cannot control above and below. One writer describes the quandry of the middle manager thusly, "There may be fifteen people who want to become the corporate vice-president, but only one can be it. So the other fourteen feel like losers."

The costs of executive stress are enormous. All organizations are vulnerable to it. Some have begun to take the problem seriously and have set up stress-management programs to deal with it. Federal Express Corporation recently hired a former university football coach to head up their program, which features physical exercise, as well as relaxation techniques. Rand Corporation pays bonuses to induce some of their work-prone executives to take vacations. Nevertheless, executive stress is still a serious, disabling phenomenon that plagues administrators throughout public and private organizations. One of the more recent findings of researchers reveals that, as female

managers move up the organizational structure, they too are beginning to show increasing frequency of hypertension, ulcers, and heart attacks that have have traditionally been associated with the aggressive male executive (2).

Happy Stressors

The effects of stress are not limited to those conditions typically thought of as negative or undesirable events. Rather, the effects of stress appear to be just as relevant to pleasant, happy occasions as they are to negative ones. Stress is involved with life's successes as much as with its difficulties. Hans Selye, M.D., who in 1936 introduced the modern concept of stress, acknowledged a few years ago that factors like joy, excitement, and pleasurable experiences can also cause the symptoms originally attributed only to "various noxious agents" (8, p.16).

Stress cannot be avoided. Stress occurs with lifes' peaks and valleys, and no one advocates trying to avoid them. Rather, it is suggested that one try to manage the stressors that will come and prevent their running and ruining one's life. The mental effort that is usually associated with these changes is obvious. But what is not obvious for too many is that "changed" (increased or decreased) mental activity is always accompanied by physical changes too: the tense tightening of muscles throughout the body; an unconscious change in posture caused by trying to project a different public image; strain on the head and neck associated with keeping alert. These are but a few of the extra demands one might put on himself as response to changes in the human system (8, p.20). When these changes occur, one needs to make appropriate adjustments in his own behavior in order to better fit in the new (or different) environment. Seyle is credited with the observation that "Everyone has to assess his strengths and weaknesses by varying his speed of living. Only through much self-assessment can a person decide what paths of life are worth pursuing, how

fast he can run to achieve his goals! and how he can minimize the negative effects of stress on his life" (8, p.20).

Hassles

One psychologist, Don Tubesing, likens stress to the tension on a violin string. If the string is tightened excessively, it snaps. If it is too slack, it will not make a musical sound. Only when it is finely tuned does it function well (3, p.82). Lazarus says that the minor hassles, because of their frequency, may have a greater effect on ones' moods and health than the major events. When someone is under pressure, petty problems that might otherwise be ignored will create a major disturbance to one's psyche. Ten common hassles that were listed by Lazarus were:

1. Concern about weight
2. Health of a family member
3. Rising prices of common goods
4. Home maintenance chores
5. Too many things to do
6. Misplacing or losing things
7. Yard work or outside home maintenance
8. Property, investments, taxes
9. Crime
10. Physical appearance (11, pp.60-1)

Lazarus further recommends that one should learn to laugh at oneself. "It sets you apart from your problem. Then you can tackle it from a new perspective" (11 p.84).

Burn-out

The term "burn-out" has been used to describe what happens to people who begin with high aspirations, who work long and hard with few or no results and become frustrated, thwarted, fatigued, depressed, and "burned out" (12, p.84; 10, p.26).

Burnout is the disease of the thwarted. When the superordinate turns out to be an idiot; when the job is insecure or unrewarding and/or the pay is low;

when the worker begins asking "Why am I here?" he is experiencing burn-out. Burn-out is not rust-out (inactivity), nor is it a cop-out (one who gives up).

Newsweek reports a teacher who, at 33, is poised at the burnout stage after a 12-year career as a second-grade teacher. She began teaching as an idealistic, creative, caring teacher. As she got better, the job got worse and she began feeling overwhelmed by circumstances beyond her (or any teacher's) control: white flight, budget cuts, vandalism, overwrought parents, and undisciplined children (5, p.81). She says, "I think I have touched some lives. But, now I'm losing more than I'm gaining. You get to a point in life where you have to do something else. I just don't have any more to give. I used to feel that I was the only one who could reach my classes. Now I feel like I'm the only chump left. I've done my bit for society. Let somebody else try now" (5, p.81).

One of the ways we can strengthen ourselves is by learning to acknowledge that the world is the way it is and accepting that fact as one of the conditions we have to live with. We cannot despair over it, dwell on the pity of it, or agitate about it. None of those will do the world any good, and they will generate such pessimism inside us that we will be stifled in our personal endeavors.

Once we have come to terms with the nature of the world, we can make reasonable estimates about where our contributions ought to lie, and we can get on with the business of refocusing ourselves. Those, at least, are feasible tasks and ones that will produce visible results in short order.

The largest single gift we can give ourselves during our lifetime does not come in a pretty box or fancy wrappings. It does not cost a lot of money, and it may never impress the neighbors. It is a quiet, readily-available commodity known as self-awareness, and, while it can not be acquired without an expenditure of time and effort, it will pay off in handsome dividends.

To succeed in averting a burn-out, it is imperative that you monitor your-

self. Only you know when it is time for you to stop driving yourself. Only you can tell when your resources and abilities are depleted. You are the best judge of the gap between your wish to do and the energy you have available for the doing. You owe it to yourself to keep tabs.

STRESS Checklist

adapted from Freudenberger's "How to Survive"

1. Do you feel yourself under pressure to succeed all the time? 1 2 3 4 5
2. Do you need to generate excitement again and again to keep from feeling bored? 1 2 3 4 5
3. Is one area of your life disproportionately important to you? 1 2 3 4 5
4. Do you feel a lack of intimacy with the people around you? 1 2 3 4 5
5. Are you unable to relax? 1 2 3 4 5
6. Are you inflexible once you have taken a stand on something? 1 2 3 4 5
7. Do you identify so closely with your activities that if they fall apart, you do too? 1 2 3 4 5
8. Are you always worried about preserving your image? 1 2 3 4 5
9. Are you taking yourself too seriously? 1 2 3 4 5
10. Are your goals unclear, shifting back and forth between long-range and immediate? 1 2 3 4 5

STRESS Checklist II

adapted from Freudenberger's "How to Survive"

1. Do you tire more easily? Feel fatigued rather than energetic? 1 2 3 4 5
2. Are people annoying you by telling you, "You don't look so good lately? 1 2 3 4 5
3. Are you working harder and harder and accomplishing less and less? 1 2 3 4 5
4. Are you increasingly cynical and disenchanted? 1 2 3 4 5
5. Are you often invaded by a sadness you can't explain? 1 2 3 4 5
6. Are you forgetting appointments, deadlines, personal possessions? 1 2 3 4 5
7. Are you increasingly irritable? More short-tempered? More disappointed in the people around you? 1 2 3 4 5
8. Are you seeing close friends and family members less frequently? 1 2 3 4 5
9. Are you too busy to do even routine things like making phone calls, reading reports or sending out Christmas cards? 1 2 3 4 5
10. Are you suffering from physical complaints (aches, pains, headaches, a lingering cold)? 1 2 3 4 5
11. Do you feel disoriented when the activity of the day comes to a halt? 1 2 3 4 5
12. Is joy elusive? 1 2 3 4 5
13. Are you unable to laugh at a joke about yourself? 1 2 3 4 5
14. Does sex seem like more trouble than it's worth? 1 2 3 4 5
15. Do you have very little to say to people? 1 2 3 4 5

STRESS Checklist III

adapted from Freudenberger's "How to Survive"
by Fred K. Bellott

1. Do you feel yourself under pressure to succeed all the time?	1 2 3 4 5
2. Do you need to generate excitement again and again to keep from feeling bored?	1 2 3 4 5
3. Is one area of your life disproportionately important to you?	1 2 3 4 5
4. Do you feel a lack of intimacy with the people around you?	1 2 3 4 5
5. Are you unable to relax?	1 2 3 4 5
6. Are you inflexible once you have taken a stand on something?	1 2 3 4 5
7. Do you identify so closely with your activities that, if they fall apart, you do too?	1 2 3 4 5
8. Are you always worried about preserving your image?	1 2 3 4 5
9. Are you taking yourself too seriously?	1 2 3 4 5
10. Are your goals unclear, shifting back and forth between long-range and immediate?	1 2 3 4 5
11. Are you working harder and harder and accomplishing less and less?	1 2 3 4 5
12. Are you increasingly cynical and disenchanted?	1 2 3 4 5
13. Are you forgetting appointments, deadlines, personal possessions?	1 2 3 4 5
14. Are you increasingly irritable? More short-tempered? More disappointed in the people around you?	1 2 3 4 5
15. Are you unable to laugh at a joke about yourself?	1 2 3 4 5

Score Analysis:

0-25	You're O.K.
25-40	Watch yourself
40-50	Dangerous area
50-75	A threat to yourself and others around you.

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